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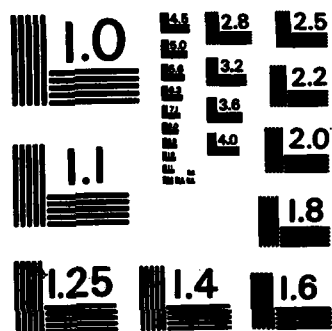
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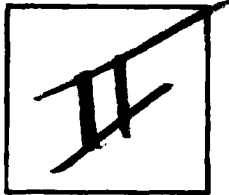


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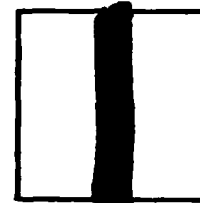
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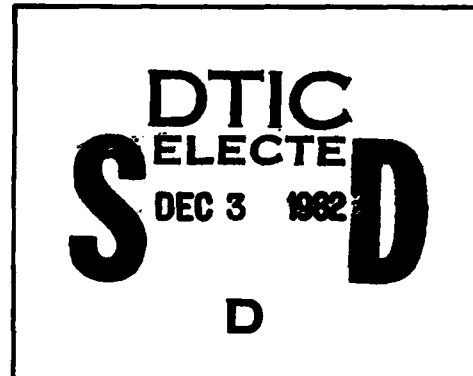
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combining skillful diplomatic maneuver and political opportunism to orchestrate French intervention while avoiding a premature confrontation with Great Britain. Students of diplomacy should marvel at his ability to focus on a constant objective while charting a circuitous course through a multitude of pitfalls. But paradoxically, from the perspective of France his accomplishments were for naught since they failed to achieve his goals. Vergennes' aims were far different from those of Washington. He had not even held the American cause in particularly high regard. After all, he knew, "that republics are less responsible than monarchies to the requirements of honor..." His goals were to deflate the power and prestige of England while hopefully raising the stature of France by an equal or greater amount. That neither was achieved was for France a lamentable outcome of his otherwise remarkable feats.

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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI

VERGENNES: THE MAN BEHIND THE YORKTOWN VICTORY

BY

RICHARD B. ROTHWELL
LTCOL USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College for consideration for the Past President's Award Essay Competition.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

4 May 1982

Yorktown, 19 October 1781. Overhead, the sun had begun its daily retreat. General George Washington sat erectly on his horse beside the Yorktown-Hampton Road watching British and German regiments file past, colors cased, at a deliberate 75 steps per minute. A few hundred yards beyond him they turned onto a field ringed by French Hussars to lay down their arms. From the opposite side of the road Lieutenant General Comte Jean Baptiste de Rochambeau, flanked by ranks of His Most Christian Majesty's smartly turned out soldiers, watched the procession with equal solemnity. Had Washington glanced to his right or left he would have seen the double lines of American troops, Continentals in front, militia behind, completing the formation through which the defeated army was passing. Beyond the French soldiers, ships of Admiral Comte Francois Joseph Paul de Grasse's fleet anchored in the York River dramatized the isolation which had induced General Lord Charles Cornwallis to surrender after only three weeks of seige. It was a momentous occasion for the American squire turned soldier. After a dismal succession of defeats he could finally report a major victory to Congress. Washington was well aware of the pivotal role the French army and navy had played in the battle. He also knew that French supplies had sustained his ragged army for almost five years. Without that support Continentals might have succumbed long ago.

Despite his debt, Washington may have given little thought that day to the man who, more than any other, was responsible for the decisive French contribution to the American Revolution, Comte Charles Gravier de Vergennes, Minister of Foreign Affairs to Louis XVI. Shrewd and single minded, Vergennes had made the victory possible by combining skillful diplomatic maneuver and political opportunism to orchestrate French intervention while avoiding a

premature confrontation with Great Britain. Students of diplomacy should marvel at his ability to focus on a constant objective while charting a circuitous course through a multitude of pitfalls. But, paradoxically, from the perspective of France his accomplishments were for naught since they failed to achieve his goals. Vergennes' aims were far different from those of Washington. He had not even held the American cause in particularly high regard. After all, he knew, "that republics are less responsible than monarchies to the requirements of honor..."¹ His goals were to deflate the power and prestige of England while hopefully raising the stature of France by an equal or greater amount. That neither was achieved was for France a lamentable outcome of his otherwise remarkable feats.

Even before the commencement of open warfare in America in the spring of 1775, Vergennes had recognized the need to temper his inclination to use the growing rift to do mischief to England. It was not that he lacked desire. Four major wars in less than 100 years had left a strong animosity between Great Britain and France. Most recently, the humiliating Treaty of Paris (1763) ending the Seven Years War had taken Canada, the Ohio Valley, all territory east of the Mississippi River except New Orleans, and had eliminated French influence in India. Forced demilitarization of Dunkirk harbor completed the shame. Despite the lure of revenge a cautious approach was necessary until the mettle of the Americans was known. France was not prepared for another war with England without reasonable assurances of quick success. True, her army, navy, and national treasury had been rebuilt by the Duc de Choiseul so that in 1775 she was stronger and richer than in 1763.² Even so, a costly war would bring financial ruin. Other European powers, though holding no love for England, offered little help: Spain, under Charles III, was loath to encourage any colonial rebellion for fear the

movement might spread to its own extensive possessions. Austria, Prussia, and Russia were preoccupied with continental matters.

Early, heady reports of American successes were encouraging. Following the capture of Ticonderoga and Crown Point (May 1775) and the impressive showing, even in defeat, against British regulars at Bunker Hill (June 1775), Vergennes was sufficiently impressed to dispatch an unofficial agent, a Monsieur Bonvouloir, to America to gather information secretly and test the mood of Congress regarding a possible formal alliance.³ His caution proved wise when the initial successes could not be sustained by an untrained army and a financially impotent Congress. Well supplied, disciplined British regulars, backed by unchallenged sea power, dominated the war in 1776. The ill conceived American invasion of Canada (September 1775-July 1776), the defeat at Long Island (August 1776), the loss of Fort Washington with 3,000 men (November 1776), and a worthless currency were ominous signals which Vergennes could not ignore. Clearly, it was in the French interest to encourage the Americans, but not at the risk of active participation in a war which might be lost. A covert strategy was required.

If the decision to aid the Americans surreptitiously seems obvious through the distance of centuries, it may not have been so to the minister of foreign affairs. Certainly, it was not easy to implement. Numerous groups and individuals encouraged more active or passive strategies. Louis XVI opposed support for the Americans. As a descendant of the Sun King, ordained to rule by God, he could not encourage republican rebels—and American rebels at that! Had they not served with Wolfe at Quebec? And, had not Washington murdered poor Ensign Jumonville in the Ohio Valley?⁴ On a less emotional level Louis XVI accepted the counsel of his minister of finance, Baron Anne-R.J. Turgot de l'Aulne, that France could not afford a war. Further, he

feared that without allies of proven military power the British might counter French intervention by seizing her few remaining lucrative colonies in the West Indies. For these reasons the King resisted Vergennes' initial proposals in December 1775 for secret aid to the Americans. Had Vergennes been less determined the matter might have died at that point, leading to far different courses for both the American and French Revolutions.

While Vergennes worked to soften the King's conservative position, he was besieged by liberals eager for a stronger, more rapid commitment than he was prepared to make. Influential salon society had been swept up with ideals of liberty and equality through the writings of political and social philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau. The new American experiment was particularly intriguing. If the Colonies could establish independence under democratic principles, perhaps change was also possible in France! The electrifying idea caused a ground swell of support for the American cause. But, to the calculating Vergennes such romantic idealism was hardly the stuff from which decisions on foreign policy should be made.

For less lofty reasons a growing number of officers also encouraged a more active French role in America. Europe was uncharacteristically at peace. Unemployed gentlemen of arms found few openings for their talents. In America, however, there was a great need for professional military leadership. Public enthusiasm for the revolution and the paucity of available positions on the continent caused many genteel Frenchmen to seek fame, and hopefully fortune, in Washington's army. Some, such as the energetic Marie-Jean-Paul-Roch-Yves-Gilbert du Mothier, the Marquis de LaFayette, made a valuable contribution. Many others were considerably less useful.⁵ Regardless of their individual merit, collectively they were strong advocates for intervention.

Certain private individuals rose above the enthusiastic, but undirected drawing room society to exert a special influence on French policy. One of the most significant was an unlikely political adventurer, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, author of The Marriage of Figaro and The Barber of Seville. In the summer of 1775, while in London as an agent for his government, Beaumarchais met Arthur Lee who held a similar position for the colony of Massachusetts. From Lee, a pugnacious man not above an overstatement or even a lie should it suit his purpose, Beaumarchais received glowing reports of American successes. Soon the young playwright was totally absorbed with the Revolution. Not awed by protocol, he communicated his enthusiasm directly to the King. In a letter to Louis XVI in February 1776 he heatedly argued a position opposite that of the King: Unless France actively supported the Americans, the West Indies would be lost. Should England win, he said, she would use her increased power to seize the islands. Should she lose, she would do the same for revenge. If England granted independence outright to the Colonies, she would be stronger still and even more likely to act aggressively. Finally, in the unlikely event the two parties should be reconciled, Beaumarchais believed the Americans, angered by the lack of French support, would join the British in an attack. Only by prompt support for the Colonies could France gain an ally to protect her territory in the Caribbean.⁶ Beaumarchais' logic was no more persuasive to Louis XVI than Vergennes' more reasoned arguments.

While Vergennes was also unimpressed by Beaumarchais' emotional appeal, he was intrigued by one suggestion which held promise for vexing England without evoking war. Beaumarchais proposed that he establish a commercial trading company to serve as a conduit for secret government support for the Americans. In April 1776 Vergennes convinced Louis XVI that the potential gain from weakening Great Britain without undue cost or danger, outweighed

the King's aversion to democracy.

Beaumarchais' new firm, Roderique Hortelez and Company, received two million livres from the Royal Treasury followed, surprisingly, by a third million from Charles III who also managed to suppress his antipathy for ~~revolutionary~~ causes for the opportunity to strike a clandestine blow against England. Support from private investors raised working capital to five million livres.⁷ With this money and access to Royal arsenals arranged by Vergennes, Beaumarchais acquired three ships which he loaded with ammunition, cannon, muskets, clothes, and boots for 25,000 men. After several false starts, partly because of Vergennes' care not to alarm the British, the vessels sailed for America in January 1777.⁸ If the British were aware of the extent of French support for the Continental Army, they chose not to make it an issue. Vergennes was able to advance his aims with minimal cost to his country.

French citizens were not the only persons seeking to influence policy. In March 1776, following the visit of Bonvouloir, the Continental Congress decided to send Silas Deane to Paris to seek a commercial treaty and war supplies. Deane arrived in July and worked closely with Beaumarchais to outfit the first ships. In September Congress increased its representation by assigning Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to join Deane as commissioners.⁹ When Jefferson declined, Arthur Lee was named in his place. If Vergennes had been challenged to temper Beaumarchais' enthusiasm, he was severely tried to handle the persistent Americans. Franklin arrived in Paris on 21 December 1776, followed the next day by Lee. The three commissioners sought an immediate audience with the foreign minister. Their request could not have come at a less opportune time for Vergennes. General Washington's reverses in New York were well known; the future of the revolution

was not clear. Lord Stormont, the British Ambassador, had discovered Beaumarchais' ships at Harve and was demanding they be interned. Potentially more damaging to Vergennes' diplomatic tightrope were Stormont's vigorous protests over assistance given American privateers in French ports. Not only were they permitted to refit at leisure, but French businessmen purchased captured British vessels and goods. Both acts were clearly in violation of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713).¹⁰ Under these circumstances official acknowledgment of the American delegation might have caused an unwanted British reaction.

While smoothly assuring Stormont of French neutrality, Vergennes met secretly with the commissioners on 28 December. Considering the circumstances, he may have been surprised at their one-sided proposals: In return for French friendship and protection of American shipping from Barbary pirates, the United States would promise not to aid England if she declared war on France. Should there be war, France was not to claim territory in North America. To complete the audacity the commissioners had been instructed by Congress to suggest that a reunion with Great Britain might follow should France demur.¹¹ When Vergennes declined to recognize formally either the United States or its representatives, the commissioners tried a different approach. In a more even tone Franklin suggested that if France would provide 30,000 guns, the United States would help seize English holdings in the West Indies.¹² Later, in March 1777, they suggested an even more ambitious plan—an open military alliance in which France and the United States would cooperate to capture Canada, New Foundland, and the British West Indies. As before, France would keep the Caribbean islands while the United States would retain gains in North America. Enticing though the proposals were, the experienced statesman knew that without Spanish support it would be

foolish to tie the destiny of France to an uncertain cause.

From 1775 through November 1777 Vergennes maintained French interests through the fiction of neutrality while providing valuable assistance to the Colonists. French officers and men served in the Continental Army. Washington's soldiers fought with munitions and supplies purchased from Royal depots with Louis' livres. American privateers enjoyed haven and support in French ports. Then, on 30 November 1777, news arrived that would change Vergennes' policy of benevolent neutrality—General John Burgoyne and 6,000 British troops had surrendered at Saratoga the previous month. Vergennes' role in that victory had been telling; 90% of American munitions and supplies had been provided by Roderique Hortelez and Company.¹³

News of Burgoyne's surrender spurred Vergennes to move rapidly lest the opportunity to strike Great Britain slip away. The American victory showed that properly equipped Continental troops could give a good account of themselves. Great Britain would not likely suppress the rebellion quickly. In this light the commissioners' warnings of possible American-British *rapprochement* held greater significance: Great Britain might now offer the Colonies more favorable peace terms. A reunion would dash hopes of debasing British power. Immediate action was needed to bind the American cause to French aims.

Two treaties signed on 6 February 1778 cemented the relationship between the two unlikely partners. The first, a treaty of amity and commerce, was similar to the one proposed by Franklin and his colleagues in December 1776. The second was a secret defensive pact to become effective only if England declared war on France. No specific military commitments were stated; however, both parties agreed their common cause would be to preserve the liberty and sovereignty of the United States and that France would not claim the

Bermuda Islands or British territory in North America. Covenants so favorable to the United States without commensurate direct benefit to France reflected the singleness of Vergennes' purpose. Louis XVI accepted the treaties at his urging, recognizing the independence of the United States without acknowledging the democratic principles upon which the revolution was based.

Vergennes' quick action proved propitious to the cause of American independence. The treaties arrived at Congress on 2 May 1778, just in time to defuse growing sentiment to consider new British peace initiatives. Had the agreements been concluded in a less timely manner, the Colonies might have remained in the British Empire as a self governing dominion.¹⁴

The French foreign minister's rapid reaction to the victory at Saratoga did not imply an abandonment of caution. Even though war with England was highly probable,¹⁵ the time was not ripe for a major military commitment in North America. France could not hope to match England in a major confrontation 3,000 miles across the sea without a powerful European ally. Spain, the most likely source of support, remained aloof. Her stake in the colonial system was too great to encourage rebellion without promise of substantial gain. Even discounting the lack of strong allies, there was a serious question as to how the American public would respond to direct French military intervention. Memories of the French and Indian War were still strong. In a limited show of force Admiral Comte Charles Hector d'Estaing was dispatched from Toulon on 13 April 1778 with eleven ships of the line and six frigates, hardly a match for the 130 British warships in North America.¹⁶

Just as French officers serving in the Continental Army had earlier been proponents of overt French support, they now urged that a royal army be dispatched to America. D'Estaing's failure at Newport (August 1778) had

shown the futility of fleet action alone. Young LaFayette, returning to Paris in February 1779 ostensibly to prepare an expedition against Canada, was a particularly vocal advocate. He solicited and received support from Franklin, Washington, and Alexander Hamilton for his plan to send 4,000 French soldiers to the United States. The leader of the expedition, he said cryptically, should be a capable person who could get along with the Americans.¹⁷

Vergennes and his officers supported a common strategy for different aims. While the calls for French ground forces by LaFayette and other officers were primarily to further personal or parochial interests, he remained wedded to his goal of striking England with least risk to France. Vergennes set about to create a diplomatic climate favorable to a more active military involvement, even at the expense of his new ally if necessary. The Franco-Spanish alliance of 12 April 1779 brought the support he sought, but not without potential cost to the United States. The *sine quo non* for gaining Spanish participation was regaining Gibraltar. Vergennes agreed that France and Spain would not focus on American independence; Spain would not even acknowledge the sovereignty of the Colonies. Instead, the parties would continue hostilities until Gibraltar was captured. Without its knowledge the United States became involved in a war of considerably greater scope than a simple revolution.¹⁸

Spain's support gave Vergennes confidence to strike England more forcefully. His first effort was an attempted joint French-Spanish invasion of the British Isles. When the venture foundered (August 1779) because of poor coordination, severe storms, and a smallpox epidemic, he turned to North America. Convinced by French officers and signals from American leaders that ground forces would be welcome, Vergennes persuaded the King in January 1780 to send 12,000 men to America, including a 6,500 man army commanded by

General Rochambeau. Unfortunately, even this force proved inadequate. With only a small supporting convoy Rochambeau was blockaded in Newport soon after arrival. An expensive and unsuccessful winter threatened to disrupt Vergennes' fragile alliance. Spain, never an enthusiastic ally, began negotiations with England, hoping to trade concessions in the United States for favorable terms elsewhere. Louis XVI, disheartened over the costly inaction, also waived. Again, Vergennes remained firm. Rather than retreat it was time for a great blow to end the war quickly. For that purpose Admiral de Grasse was sent to American waters with 26 ships of the line. These forces, along with those of Rochambeau gave Washington the tools for victory at Yorktown.

Vergennes left a double legacy from his association with the American Revolution. The first concerned his contribution to the struggle for independence. Providentially for the United States he was the dominate force among Louis XVI's ministers. For seven years he remained steadfast to his aims, resisting the exhortations of zealots and admonitions of conservatives except as they supported his perceptions of national interests. Although he never saw Yorktown his efforts were as instrumental in the victory there as those of the men who stormed Cornwallis' redoubts or kept Graves' fleet at bay. The second part of Vergennes' legacy was more subtle and continuously relevant. He provided a case study for statesmen showing that resolute and skillful diplomacy can be meaningless if the goals and assumptions upon which they are based are faulty. In a bitter fate, the results of his brilliant efforts were not what he had expected. Britain did not suffer a mortal blow from the loss of the Colonies. A trade bonanza between France and the United States to offset the cost of the war did not materialize. As Turgot had warned, the confrontation drained the Royal Treasury,

sparking internal unrest. Most significantly, the cause which Vergennes had dispassionately supported fed the demand for reform in his own country, leading to its own revolution and the most costly wars the world had then known.

NOTES

1. Vergennes to Ossum, 12 January 1777, quoted in James Brech Perkins, France in the American Revolution (New York: Burt Franklin, reprinted 1970 from 1911), p. 148.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

3. Bonvouloir's meeting with Congress in December 1775 encouraged that body to reverse an earlier decision not to seek foreign alliances. Benjamin Franklin was one of those who changed his vote. Later, he would become the chief American architect of the treaties ultimately signed in February 1778.

4. Ensign Coulon de Jumonville de Villiers was killed by a Seneca Indian during an American-Indian assault on his camp in the Ohio Valley on 27 May 1754. Lieutenant Colonel George Washington, then the commander of a body of Virginia militia, led the attack. The incident received considerable notoriety in France. The French maintained the act was murder in that Jumonville was traveling under a flag of truce to warn English settlers to leave the territory. The Americans and British claimed he was spying on Washington's forces and, therefore, subject to attack.

Allan W. Eckert, Wilderness Empire (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), p. 236-238.

5. Phillippe du Coudray, one of the first French officers in America, was one of the least effective adventurers. Initially, he demanded Congress commission him as a major general in command of all artillery and engineers. Believing that Congress had agreed, Generals Knox, Greene, and Sullivan, submitted their resignations. When Congress refused his demand, du Coudray devoted his efforts to seeding doubt about the effectiveness of Beaumarchais and the commissioners in Paris. His drowning on 16 September 1777 was described by LaFayette as a happy accident. (As cited in Perkins, p. 169.)

6. Edward E. Hale and Edward E. Hale, Jr., Franklin in France (New York: Burt Franklin, reprinted 1969 from 1887), part I, p. 39.

7. Livres were equivalent to the present French francs. At the current exchange rate of 6.3 francs per dollar, Beaumarchais working capital amounted to more than \$793,000.

8. Beaumarchais' substantial contribution to the American Revolution was never fully appreciated by his beneficiaries. Knowing the financial weakness of the United States, he had hoped to regain his personal investment by payments of tobacco. But, Arthur Lee convinced Congress incorrectly that all funds were gifts from the French government for which payment was not expected. Forced to flee France for Hamberg during the revolution of 1789, Beaumarchais died in 1795, a bitter and unpaid man. Not until 1835 did the U.S. government agree to repay his heirs a portion of what he had provided in its darkest hours.

9. Historians have generally concluded that the decision to increase the number of official representatives was tied to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. (See Hale, p. 1 and Perkins, p. 129.) Perhaps another factor influencing that decision was concern over the possible adverse effects of Washington's loss at Long Island on French support. The stature of Franklin and Jefferson showed the importance Congress placed on the negotiations.

10. The Treaty of Utrecht, to which both France and Great Britain were signatories, settled the War of Spanish Succession. Article XV stated in part, "It shall be unlawful for any foreign Privateers...to fit their ships in Ports of one or the other of the aforesaid parties, to sell what they have taken..., neither shall they be allowed even to purchase victuals, except such as shall be necessary for their going to the next port of that Prince from whom they have Commission." Hale, p. 130.

11. Samuel Flagg Bemis, The Diplomacy of the American Revolution (Bloomington, Ind: Ind. University, 1957), p. 46.

12. Perkins, p. 147.

13. R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, A History of the Modern World (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1978), p. 336.

14. Bemis, p. 69.

15. In fact, England declared war on France on 17 June 1778.

16. Hale, p. 182-183.

17. Lee Kenett, The French Forces in America, 1780-1783. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1977), p. 9.

18. Bemis, p. 86.

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